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Now You'll Have Something To Cry About

C. G. Thompson

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One morning in October 1970, Graham Whiting's father arrived at work and was never seen again. He locked the door to his windowless lab at 7:40 and didn't leave that evening. No body was ever found, no evidence of foul play. Detectives even dusted the air-shaft cover for fingerprints, to no avail. The story was front-page news for months, and rumors emerged that he might have been kidnapped. The case remains open, and you can read about it on the Internet, where amateur sleuths still grapple with its dead ends.

Reporters labeled the disappearance a closed-room mystery, but Graham maintained there was no mystery at all. His father, he told his friends, had built a time machine and traveled into the past. Most of his friends were older, twelve or thirteen, and teased him mercilessly, but I was ten and believed him. The world had room for dreams and magic, I reasoned. If astronauts could photograph an Earthrise and step into moon dust, why couldn't elegant machines circumvent time?

I was the only one who took Graham seriously enough to ask why his father vanished.

"To fix something," he said.

"Like a car?"

"A problem. I don't know what."

A few years later, Graham asked me not to mention his father again. His mother had grown bitter. She decided he'd defected, accepted a massive amount of money to share his knowledge, whatever it was, with the Soviets. Graham himself was starting to have trouble in school, beginning to drink and smoke.

"She thinks he defected? Why?"

"There is no why," Graham said.

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The crash occurred when I was twenty-two, just out of college. It took my parents and sister and 136 other people on an innocent July afternoon, the aircraft never making altitude, a storm and microburst sucking breath from the air. The plane hit trees and powerlines, slammed into a subdivision, killed seven people on the ground.

At the time, little was known about wind shear, and planes had no instruments to detect it. It was a hidden monster, the unleashed id in *Forbidden Planet*.

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"It's a cousin to a Univac," Graham tells me in summer 2017. "Not that big, but don't expect a laptop."

When I was a kid, my parents spoke of the Univac with reverence. They told me it had predicted who'd win the 1952 Presidential election – Eisenhower in a landslide upset – but only its inventors had believed it.

"As long as it isn't HAL and doesn't try to kill me."

"Speaking of which, I can't go anywhere near there," Graham says. "If you disappear, I will have been the last person to have seen you."

"Future perfect tense. Used correctly!"

"Seriously."

"So you believe in it? For a long time you said you didn't."

"It was easier that way. It's probably not even there now." He coughs, deep in his throat.

"You said he kept it in a storage closet in the lab."

He shrugs, and I see the boy he once was.

"Maybe they left it, and people used it," I offer.

"Could be. But they haven't fixed much, from what I can tell."

"Maybe it was personal. Maybe they weren't trying to change the world."

"Believe me, you don't want to go."

"I do. I've thought about it a long time."

"So to speak. You know, there's no sunscreen there," he jokes.

"True. On the positive side, no surveillance cameras. Except maybe at banks."

"No airbags."

"No self-service lines at the grocery. Halloweens where kids walk instead of being chauffeured."

"No spellcheck."

"Did you really say that?"

"I did."

"Vacations where people actually relax," I say.

"Second-hand smoke everywhere."

That stops me. Graham has emphysema – the lungs, his doctors told him, of a seventy-five-year-old man. It's doubtful he'll see his son graduate from college.

"I'm sorry," he says. "Cheap shot."

"No. Fair enough."

"Childhood casts a golden glow on things. There were plenty of problems then."

"I know. But my parents and sister are there. So are you."

"It's too late for me."

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The headache is intense, a migraine with dancing lights. My hands are cupped across my closed eyes, but the aura ebbs, flows, and flickers anyway. It's a movie of sorts, the screen catching the projector burning the film. My first migraine hit me in fourth grade, and classmates accused me of lying to avoid a history test. I knew I'd never hear the end of it if I went home, so I deciphered the questions peripherally and made an A.

I'm sitting on a curb. The sun heats my fingers, and I hear the flutelike song of a wood thrush. I fan my hands outward just enough to look at my feet, see I'm wearing orange sandals with yellow daisies, sandals from my childhood. I shade my eyes and look ahead. Facing me is a forest, a hundred acres Cecily Reed's parents owned until the late 1990s. A dirt road led to their modest frame house, and Mrs. Reed made and sold cakes. When we reached high school, she cautioned Cecily not to tell her boyfriend that the family owned more than an acre. Even in 1970, the land was worth a fortune.

The forest should be a gated community, the Reeds retired to a condo in Florida, but the woods and narrow road are irrefutable. I pull a lock of hair toward my face and note it's blonde, which it hasn't been since I was fifteen. My left arm, the arm I broke in April 1970, feels weak and spindly, the way it did after my cast was removed. I drape it across my lap, startled at how fragile it looks.

I cup my hands over my eyes again. I've done the impossible, traveled through time. The thought is exhilarating and frightening. What if I've arrived in a different past, where my parents don't exist? Or what if they don't know me? Graham said to expect anything, and nothing.

"You might get there and forget what you wanted to change."

"You think that's what happened to your dad?"

"Who knows? But if you reach the past, someone in the present will die."

Prickles of shame burned my scalp. What if I stole Graham's time?

"Don't worry," he said. "It's not literal. But my mother did die, in a way. Every phone call – she thought it was him. Or the police saying they'd found his body. Or a ransom message. She wouldn't let me answer the phone for two years."

I studied my fingernails, bitten to the quick. "You always think they'll come back."

"I'm sorry. Bad memories. But my point is that people will miss you."

"A limited number." I'd never married, was convinced I'd lose any new family I created.

"I'll miss you."

I nodded, not trusting my voice.

"You'll be stuck there, you know."

I open my eyes, and a car passes, a large, gas-guzzling car that will seem threatening and obsolete in just three years, when the price of oil skyrockets during the Arab oil embargo. I think how much things have changed, how much they haven't. I look at my legs, slightly pink, with summer scrapes and bruises. *No sunscreen.*

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The Boeing remained in the air for less than a minute. It rose little more than a hundred feet, and traveled just under a mile. It was destroyed so completely that only the flight recorder and accounts from survivors on the ground gave clues to what happened. The pilots turned off the air conditioning to increase power, and when all hope was lost, tried to steer toward a lake. Instead, they plowed through streets and houses, stop signs, gardens, swing sets. Two girls playing hopscotch died instantly.

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I stand in front of my parents' house, taking in its newness. The lawn looks fresh and crisp, and the mailbox is sleek and undented. Two years will pass before one of my sister's friends sideswipes the mailbox, drunk on Scotch she stole from her father's liquor cabinet.

I shade my eyes, open the mailbox, find a *Look,* a *BusinessWeek,* a letter from my grandmother, and a phone bill. No credit-card offers, no catalogs, nothing that suggests personal information being bought and sold. I sit on the driveway and flip through *Look*, reorienting myself to a time when Nixon is president and the Vietnam War rages, when National Guardsmen recently killed student protestors at Kent State.

Cell phones, debit cards, DVDs – none of these exist. The Internet is in rudimentary development, unknown to the general public.

Something tickles my leg, and I brush off an ant.

Graham lives down one street and up a long hill to another. I wonder what would happen if I arrived at his door, announced I was from the future? If Dr. Whiting were home, would he be the man who was living his life for the first time, or the man who'd returned?

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The machine was right where Graham said it would be. Other types of machines lurked in offices and hallways, deserted along with the industrial complex itself. Razor wire still topped the fences, but the gatehouse was empty. I drove onto the parking lot, feeling the same low-key criminality I always felt as an adult when I bought cigarettes for my parents. Inside, my flashlight illuminated the sketchy map Graham had drawn, and I broke into a sweat. Air conditioning and electricity had been turned off the month before, when researchers left the nondescript buildings for the last time.

If I were lucky – or unlucky, Graham said – the machine would still be wired into the fire-alarm system, which would continue to operate until the building was demolished.

He was hazy on the science, but his father had explained that time wasn't linear, that it could be folded like a ribbon, present touching past. That was why, his father said, you could recall an embarrassing moment from twenty years before, with humiliation undiminished. The push and pull between past and present set up vibrations, which his father hypothesized could be turned into movement.

As for operating the machine, Graham handed me a time-softened, crumpled piece of paper with an algorithm laid out in a neat, precise hand He said to type in

the letters and numbers as written, then hit the space bar. After a beep, type in the destination month and year. Next, press a number for the displacement factor, which would be expressed in kilometers and supposedly position me the chosen distance from the lab.

"Just hope you don't end up inside a tree," he said.

"Thanks. Is that a real possibility?"

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I head to the basement, its cool air sifting toward me. The steps look new, their varnish not yet worn. In the corner, metal shelving holds old comic books, glass Coke bottles, my dollhouse, and copies of *National Geographic*. My sister collected *Superboy* comics, and I can't help but wonder how much they'd be worth on eBay. I liked the Legion of Super-Heroes, especially Phantom Girl – an ironic or prescient choice.

My father is standing on the slab of patio outside, shaded by the screened-in porch above, tending the grill. I open the glass-paned door.

"Daddy," I whisper. I once took those syllables for granted. "Daddy," I repeat.

"Hi, Doll."

His posture is confident, his face smooth and unworried. At the pool, even the high-school lifeguards admire his strong freestyle. My eyes tear up, so I busy myself folding and unfolding one of the metal lawn chairs latticed with strips of cloth. I haven't seen these chairs in years. They're from the early 60s, a time of cheery pastels, before a President was killed.

I turn and sit. If this were the future, I'd find my father with SmartPhone in hand, laptop on the chair beside him. Sunday or not, there'd be files to send, a company website to check. His mind would be flooded with passwords. Instead, he's smoking a cigarette and checking the charcoals. A bourbon and water rests on the windowsill.

Vague nausea settles over me, an aftereffect of traveling in time, or a reaction to the questions I have, too many to process.

"Are we going to the beach?" I ask, although that's not what I meant to say. We did go to the beach that year, and he rescued me when a wave pushed me down. A second wave tossed into us, knocking off his sunglasses, so we walked the shoreline the next morning, seeking them among broken bits of shells.

"Picture a fish in sunglasses," he'd said then.

"Daytona," he says now. "I'm working for a week there, then I have two weeks off."

I laugh, thinking about the fish.

"What's so funny?" He always liked a good joke.

"I don't know." My feet hang above the ground, and I scissor kick my legs. I didn't remember how silly my body could be. "Fish, I guess."

My mother never waded more than knee-deep in the ocean, claimed fish were nibbling her toes.

He smiles, thinking the same thing, one word triggering our family shorthand. A pocket of calm grows between us, calm unbroken by ringtones, car alarms, or leaf blowers.

My father places the steaks on the grill, one for each of us, although I never can finish mine. The sizzle sets me firmly in my childhood, but my thoughts flash to burning flesh, to cows corralled against their will, to humans caught in a flaming fuselage, a fancy name for a sleek aluminum death tube. I begin to cry.

"What's the matter, Hon?" my father asks, tongs in midair. He's startled. What could be wrong on this beautiful day?

I try to explain, but words won't come. I swing my legs harder and look toward the slope of the back yard, a precipitous drop that begins at patio's edge and seems like a metaphor.

"Is it your arm, Doll? It'll be fine."

If I can time travel, I can freeze this moment forever, can't I? Freeze this moment and protect my family from harm.

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In the kitchen, my mother pours milk. I follow her every move, transfixed. She's wearing the watch she'll always wear, one her father gave her for graduation, and I'm happy to see her moving easily, her arthritis on hold for another ten years. She squeezes a dishcloth and wipes the counter. Her hair is a lovely brown, legs and arms fashionably tan.

I step aside to let my father enter. We'll be eating as we do every summer Sunday, on the screened-in porch. Steak, baked potatoes, a tossed salad with Roquefort dressing, dinner rolls with real butter and, for me, grape jelly.

It's overwhelming to see my parents, and I feel guilt, as if I've reanimated them, which I had no right to do. I wonder if Dr. Whiting had the same feelings. I pull the ice trays from the freezer, then study the kitchen. No microwave, no answering machine, no recycling container. The phone has a dial, and there's a transistor radio near the stove. I think ahead, to when we'll buy a car with AM-FM, and how magical it will seem that the FM signal doesn't disappear when we pass under a bridge. I remember my parents' easy-listening stations and, oddly enough, the Mutual Broadcasting System.

"Wash your hands," my mother says, reaching for the trays.

I turn toward the bathroom, come face to face with my sister. She's wearing her uniform – tie-dyed T-shirt and bell bottoms with the hems ripped out. I rush into her arms. The scent of smoke hovers in her hair, and I hope my parents won't notice. Jody is angry about Kent State and Vietnam and leaves the room in disgust whenever the news comes on. In the future, she'll become what she would have hated, an assistant district attorney.

"Long time no see," I joke, trying to hide my emotions.

"A whole two hours," she says.

I loosen my grip, and she flashes the peace sign.

"'V for Victory,'" my mother says.

"Don't start," my father tells them, pulling open the sliding glass door. "Let's have a nice dinner."

Four place settings cover the picnic table, everything neat and in its place, as if chaos could be staved off so easily. When we sit down, I can barely eat. I cut small bites of steak, try not to taste them.

“Why are you shaking your head?” Jody asks.

I hadn’t realized I was. “I don’t know.” I shake it vigorously, pretending I‘d meant to. Next door the neighbor’s collie, Sharpy, is barking.

“Is anything wrong?” my mother asks.

“It’s the world,” Jody says. “The world is screwed up. Even kids know it.”

“I’m not a kid.”

She rolls her eyes.

“Jody, watch your language,” my father says.

“Please eat,” my mother tells me. “Your father worked hard to cook a good steak for you.”

“Why isn‘t life fair, Daddy?” I ask. I crumple my napkin, holding on for dear life. After my family is gone, I’ll become anorexic, return to my childhood weight. Why grow up when the world is too dangerous for your own parents?

Jody exhales in exasperation.

“I don’t know, Doll.” He scrapes a forkful of potato from its skin. “Most of the time it is, but sometimes it isn’t. Why?”

“You should eat the skin, Hon,” my mother tells him. “Most of the nutrients are in the skin.”

“Life isn’t fair because Geoff Nealy is in Vietnam probably about to get his ass shot off,” Jody says.

‘Straighten up and fly right!” my father commands. I’d forgotten he used to say that, a warning before banishing us to our rooms. Now the words are a cruel

prediction. My eyes rim with tears.

"Have you been smoking?" my mother asks Jody.

"Have you?" Jody challenges. "What is it now, two packs a day?"

"I think you should excuse yourself," my father tells her.

"You should excuse your whole generation!" she shoots back, tossing her napkin into her steak juice.

"Stop fighting!" I shout. "Stop it, stop it, stop it!" I kick the legs of the table, and even Jody turns to look. "You're all – stupid!" I'm frustrated that I can only hint at the truth. "You're wasting time!" I yell, remembering Mrs. Taylor's favorite admonishment. Mrs. Taylor was my fourth-grade teacher, wore glasses on a chain around her neck.

"What's gotten into you?" my mother demands.

I've forgotten how elastic and agile my childhood emotions could be. "You're wasting time! Stupid, stupid, stupid!" I can't stop myself, feel perilously close to a tantrum.

"Aren't you too old for that?" Jody says.

"Go to your rooms, both of you," my father says. "No phone calls, Jody."

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The tragedy began as background noise, rain drumming against the windows of the plane. As the pilots waited for instructions to taxi to the runway, the sky darkened, and the wind increased. Nightfall was hours away, but the afternoon light was vanquished.

Jody was twenty-eight and newly divorced. Her husband never left the 60s, felt betrayed that she had. My father took a week off, and my parents planned a trip with her to Las Vegas, hoping to cheer her up. I was supposed to join them, but had to cancel. The week before, I'd gotten my first job. It was a job I came to hate but that saved my life.

Over the years, I've kept my airline ticket in my dresser, under the engraved money clip that belonged to my father and survived the crash. Each July, I remove the clip from the drawer, touch my father's initials, wonder when he last held it. Then I slide the ticket from its jacket to study flight, gate, and seat numbers. I imagine the aisle seat I would have occupied next to Jody, down to the metal armrest with its built-in ashtray. My seat was reassigned to a businessman from Chicago, someone Jody would have struck up a conversation with, a stranger who died in my place.

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It's Monday evening, and I'm standing on the brick steps of the Whiting's house, glancing at its pillars and the sky. The clouds don't seem different than the ones I left. Maybe in cloud time, I haven't traveled any appreciable distance. Next door Mrs. Patterson weeds her garden. I wave, thinking how pretty she looks with her newly frosted hair, trying not to picture how thin and drawn she'll be by the time I'm a high school sophomore and she's dying of breast cancer. It seems wrong that I possess such horrible knowledge and can't act on it. I've created culpability for myself, one I can't atone for or escape. I try to say *culpability*, a word I won't actually know until my twenties, but the syllables won't form.

Mrs. Patterson's face is slightly out of focus, and I realize I'm already growing nearsighted. I climb the steps to ring the doorbell, hoping Dr. Whiting might answer, although I only remember seeing him once. Maybe he'd sense I needed help. The July sun angles onto the porch, casting bands of light and shadow. Graham answers the door. His hair is darker, curlier, and thicker than I recall, and he seems taller. His son will look just like him.

"Hi," he says. "Want a medal or a monument?"

I'd felt emotion welling up in me, but now I laugh, remembering our standard greeting from that summer. We'd picked it up from Mrs. Taylor, who said it when we were being lazy.

"You're wasting time," I tell him, mimicking her, then realize it's true. I fold my arms against my body and dig the nails of my right hand into my weaker left arm, where Graham can't see. The pain keeps me from breaking into tears.

"What are you looking at?" he asks.

I can't tell him I'm mesmerized by seeing him at ten again. "Nothing. Is your dad home?" In three months, his father will vanish.

"Is he ever?"

I kick at the welcome mat, pull up an edge with my toe.

"Why?" he asks, not unkindly.

"I don't know." I try to imagine what Graham is doing this moment in 2017. Is he having a good day health-wise?

"We're eating dinner. I can come over later," he says.

Don't ever smoke, I want to warn him. Such an easy verb, *smoke*, but I'm unable to speak it.

"A monument," I say.

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Once the plane's door was closed, a flight attendant gave the standard safety talk as her fellow attendants pointed toward emergency exits, showed how to tighten seatbelts, demonstrated the oxygen masks that would drop from above if cabin pressure were lost. Seat cushions could be used as flotation devices, and the aisle had special lighting that would illuminate in the event of a power outage.

Did the passengers listen intently, or did some continue conversations, work crossword puzzles, or open paperbacks they'd just bought?

Passengers should study the aircraft safety card, the attendant stressed before the final cabin check: making sure tray tables were upright and overhead compartments were tightly closed.

I've always imagined my father squeezing my mother's hand, then winking at Jody across the aisle. In his mind he was composing a letter to the airline, praising the attendants for their calm professionalism. He often wrote letters of appreciation, although I never knew it until I found carbon copies in his file cabinet after his death.

The crash was so severe that passengers and crew had to be identified using dental records. Only half of the dead were positively identified.

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I start back home, walking past houses being built, smelling the scent of cut pine, aftershock of forests being felled. I glance at the existing houses across the street and realize they look much the same as they will in 2017, minus security-system signs, satellite dishes, portable basketball hoops.

A car stops and honks – Billy Cauley and his little brother, Shawn. Shawn is the neighborhood bully. By the time he's fourteen, he'll be selling drugs, and, rumor has it, having sex with his older brother's girlfriends.

He jumps out of the car and follows me as Billy whistles and drives off. When I'm in college, their parents will divorce after Mr. Cauley pushes Mrs. Cauley down a staircase.

"You're bleeding," Shawn says.

"No, I'm not."

"Are, too!" He slaps my arm.

"Knock it off!" I feel my left arm and realize he's telling the truth. I keep walking.

"Remember when your face was a big scab when you fell off that pony?"

"It was a horse. It bucked me off."

I want to tell him that I know his father beats his mother, but of course the words won't form. He slaps my butt.

"Quit it!"

"Quit it!" he taunts, then sweeps a leg into my ankles. I fall hard.

"Now you'll have something to cry about," he says.

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Our minister assured me that everything happened so fast, no one suffered. But there was time for fear, time to feel the airplane jolt, surrender to gravity. Isn't fear a kind of suffering?

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The house is quiet when I return, but from the screened-in porch I hear my parents talking on the patio. I sit on top of the picnic table, basking in their murmuring, the soft fabric that helps knit a family. I keep expecting a cell phone to ring, to break their train of thought, but cell phones won't be on the market for more than a decade.

When crickets overtake their voices, I go upstairs, scooting backwards up the staircase, another childlike thing I can't help doing. In the next few months, there will be two plane crashes, both involving college football teams – Marshall, Wichita State. I wonder how I'll handle hearing about them. Like the crash that took my family, the Marshall tragedy left no survivors. Players, coaches, crew, fans – all perished.

My sister's door is closed, and I see she's decorated it with a green-and-white-striped sticker. The Ecology flag is something I haven't seen in years. Probably even friends I grew up with wouldn't remember it. Our parents will be upset, not because of the sticker itself, but because it can't be removed without pulling up the paint underneath.

I pick up the phone in the hall, dial our number and hang up, then dash into my room. Jody hurries out to answer on the first ring, says "Hello" several times, places the receiver in its cradle. When she returns to her room, I sneak out and do it again. She opens her door, answers, hangs up forcefully.

The third time, she catches me. "What is wrong with you?"

But I can't tell her. I can't even tell her that one day the phone company will fix the glitch that allows you to call your own home and hear the phone ring. It's a trick we've played before, one that, as ridiculous as it sounds, I miss as an adult.

"Can I listen to your records?"

"May I," she corrects. What happened to your knees?"

I shrug.

"Don't you have your own records?" She slams her door so hard I feel the air displace.

I sulk in the hallway, then go to my room, lie on the carpet, and push the door shut with my foot. The Beatles' "Why Don't We Do It in the Road?" drifts through the walls. It dawns on me that Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix are still alive, at least for a few more moments.

The downdraft of the future weighs on me, and I wonder how I'll make it through the years, up to the crash and beyond. As Graham said, there's no way to return. In this time, the building where Graham's father works is bustling with people, secrets, innovations.

In my own time, the police have found my abandoned car. Maybe they've called in a search team, wondered why my purse, with nothing missing, was left on the passenger seat. An uncomfortable tingle washes over me, self-consciousness at being the center of wasted time and energy. By now – whatever *now* means – the local paper has featured the story on its front page and website, and readers are posting comments and speculation. For some, it's a game.

"You can't imagine the ramifications of what you're going to do," Graham had told me.

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Experts determined that the pilots had been able to stop their descent, had begun to climb, but it was too late to clear the powerlines and trees. Safety – or at least a chance of it – beckoned just beyond, a few feet above. So near, so far.

C.G. THOMPSON's fiction has appeared in *Main Street Rag*, *a Main Street Rag fiction anthology*, *The Bitter Oleander*, and *Boston Literary Magazine*, among others. She is a winner of the North Carolina State University Poetry Contest and a three-time finalist for the James Applewhite Poetry Prize. Her poems have been displayed in downtown Winston-Salem, NC, as part of Poetry in Plain Sight, and have also appeared in *North Carolina Literary Review*, *Pinesong*, *Pegasus*, and Sandcutters, among others.